

Backcountry Caves

Caving Opportunities

You may be able to enter one of several wild caves in Carlsbad Caverns National Park by obtaining a special permit from the Cave Resources Office. This brochure provides information to help you decide which cave to visit based upon your caving experience, interests, and abilities. Some caves are difficult to locate and enter, requiring technical climbing skills, experience in reading topographical maps, extended hiking in very rough and potentially hazardous terrain, and adjusting to the extremes of a desert climate. Therefore, we suggest you acquire this type of experience before you visit the caves in this area.

Most of the caves are between one and four miles from the nearest road. Be sure to carry plenty of water, particularly in the summer when daily requirements may exceed a gallon a day per person.

Overnight camping is permitted only in the back country, and requires a separate non-fee camping permit which can be obtained at the visitor center.

Any entry into a wild cave may result in irreparable damage to the cave. All park caves will be carefully monitored for impacts. Caves impacted by careless users will be closed. Please support our wild caving program by caving in a safe manner, taking care to preserve cave features.

Natural History

Rocks of the Guadalupe Mountains were deposited about 250 million years ago when this area was adjacent to the deep Delaware Basin, a large inland arm of the Panthalassia Ocean. On the shelf surrounding this basin, limestones formed from the accumulation of vast numbers of the limy skeletons of various marine organisms and by direct precipitation from sea water. Eventually, water circulation in the basin was restricted, the water became very salty from evaporation, the reef organisms died, and the basin was filled to overflowing with salts.

Much later, upwelling rock deep in the earth may have caused the early Guadalupe Mountains to form, perhaps 30-50 million years ago. Caves developed deep in the ground as fresh waters beneath the mountains mixed with briny basin waters, increasing the solubility of limestones along fractures in the rock. Oxidation of hydrogen sulfide from the basin to form sulfuric acid was also a major contributor to cave development.

Mountain building began over 12 million years ago and elevated some of the caves above the level of the ground water, causing them to drain and dry. As the mountains rose, erosion by water removed the deposits that covered much of the reef and cut deep rugged canyons into the exposed portions. Continued erosion opened entrances to some of the caves. As this water entered the cave, both evaporation and the carbon dioxide loss to the cave atmosphere caused the dissolved minerals to precipitate in a fantastic array of beautiful cave formations.

Cave Permits

At least one month advance notice, in writing, is required for scheduling a trip. Reservations are on a first-come, first-served basis, available by telephone. The park may deny a permit to any individual or group that does not have proper equipment and/or experience. Once the permit application is approved, it will be returned to you by mail or you may arrange to pick it up in person. To receive a permit application, write to:

Superintendent
Carlsbad Caverns National Park
3225 National Parks Highway
Carlsbad, NM 88220

Or call (505)785-2232, x363 or x368, leave your name, address, and phone number.

e-mail: dale_pate@nps.gov
jason_richards@nps.gov
stan_allison@nps.gov

Note: Reservations for ranger-led trips to Ogle Cave must be confirmed three days before the scheduled date, otherwise they will be cancelled.

Fees

Entry into Ogle Cave requires a Ranger escort.
Fees are: Age 18-62 \$15.00
Golden Age Passport \$ 7.50
Golden Access Passport \$ 7.50

These trips are classified as special-use, therefore, the Golden Eagle Passport does not apply. The other wild caves do not require a fee.

Cave Trail Markers

Some routes are marked with flagging tape to reduce impact on delicate formations or floor material. Please stay on these routes; do not disturb the tape.

Conservation

Every entry into a cave, by any person, creates disturbance. The accumulative impact of even slight changes and disturbances, even innocent ones, can lead to dramatic alterations of the cave environment, or to people's enjoyment. It is important to remember this fact as you enter and enjoy caves. Your actions while caving will be one of the greatest determining factors in the condition of cave resources and enjoyment of these caves by future generations. It is everybody's responsibility to respect the cave environment.

Boot scuff marks on rocks are one of the more unsightly signs of human usage. They are very difficult if not impossible to remove. The use of non-marking boots is encouraged. It is important not to track mud through the cave. Periodic cleaning of hands and boots soles can contribute greatly to the wild caving experience for everyone else that follows.

Most of the caves have been used, at one time or another, by bats. Five of these caves are routinely used by various bat species. Several of these species are extremely sensitive to the mere presence of humans. To reduce stress and mortality levels in bats, please do not disturb them. To accomplish this; reduce the

Age Limits

Trip leaders must be 18 years of age. Visitors to vertical caves must be at least 16 years of age. Visitors to horizontal caves must be at least 13 years of age and if under 16 must have a legal parent or legal guardian with them. Visitors to permit caves under 18 years of age must have special permission in writing, signed by their parent or guardian, before entering any permit cave. This written permission must be received by the Cave Resource Office before the trip may take place.

Safety

These caves are preserved in their natural state; therefore, potential hazards exist that require certain safety precautions:

- Take three dependable and independent sources of light.
- Wear sturdy shoes that protect the ankles and have non-leather, non-skid soles.
- Gloves and kneepads may be necessary in some caves.
- Wear a helmet to protect against low ceiling and falling rock. Use of a chinstrap prevents losing your helmet and light.
- Mount your main source of light on your helmet to free your hands for climbing.
- Three people is the minimum safe group size.

Note: For caves requiring rope work, each person must have their own ascending and descending devices and be experienced in their use.

amount of time near bats, do not shine lights directly on them, and do not make any sudden movements or loud noises.

Besides bats and cavers, other creatures inhabit caves. Often neglected or overlooked, cave invertebrates are as, or more sensitive than many other dwellers of the cave environment, and no less interesting or deserving of respect. There are over 130 species of invertebrates found in caves within the park, several being true troglobites.

These caves are being managed to perpetuate the cave and its associated values, and to provide for educational and recreation interests now, as well as the future. You can affect not only the cave environment, but also future management decisions. If you are to affect caves, make it a positive one. People can impact caves far greater than nature can repair them, or create new ones—please cave softly.

Vertical Caves

These caves require the use of vertical caving techniques. Groups must be experienced in vertical caving and may be required to show their vertical equipment and rope(s) to a park ranger before being issued a permit.

Important Note: Each person must have their own ascending and descending devices. Do not pass vertical gear up and down the rope.

HELENS CAVE

Elevation: 4,580 feet
Distance from trailhead: 1 mile
Approximate walking time: 1 hour
Group size: minimum 3, maximum 6
Equipment: one rope at least 100' long and ropepads; vertical gear for each person

Though the entrance drop is only 30', a 100' rope is needed due to the scarcity of anchor points. Below the entrance drop, the cave heads off in two directions. The right-hand passage ends in a crawlway after 50'. The main portion of the cave lies beyond a three foot high constriction on the left-hand side. The main chamber is decorated with a variety of delicate speleothems. Additional passage can be found up a 15' climb (no rope needed) on the left-hand side of the room. This passage is heavily decorated and requires extreme care not to damage the many fragile formations hanging from the ceiling.

OGLE CAVE

Ogle Cave is very delicate and still contains historic guano mining equipment. For these reasons, a ranger guide is required for all trips to this cave. Trips are also limited to a total of two per month, so advance planning is recommended. The fee for ranger-led trips is \$15 per person.
Elevation: 4,854 feet
Distance from trailhead: 1.25 miles
Approximate hiking time: 1.25 hours
Equipment: one rope at least 250' long; vertical gear for each person.

The rappel on the lower west side of the sinkhole drops into the main walking passage. Several

ropepads are needed for this rappel. The main chamber extends to the south for approximately 1,450'. The Boulder Room leads off from the main chamber roughly 600' from the entrance. Ogle Cave, one of the largest on the park, contains shields, breccia, helictites and massive stalagmites. This cave also contains a 106' tall column, the *Bicentennial*, which is the tallest in the park and one of the tallest in the world. Guided tours vary in length and are confined to a flagged trail.

WEN CAVE

Elevation: 4,747 feet
Distance from trailhead: .5 mile
Approximate hiking time: .5 hour
Group Size: minimum 3, maximum 6
Equipment: one rope at least 100' long; vertical gear for each person.

Wen Cave is a small, pretty cave decorated with very fragile formations. The entrance is roughly 7' by 5' and is somewhat hidden by vegetation. The entrance passage extends for about 20', at which point it opens up into a 55' vertical drop. The lower chamber runs in two directions from the base of the drop. The southern passage continues for 100' and terminates in a room 30' in diameter with a 40' ceiling. To the north, the passage continues for about 175' and terminates in a flowstone block. Much of this area is decorated with flowstone, columns, shields and pool features.

CHIMNEY CAVE

Elevation: 4,328 feet
Distance from trailhead: .5 mile
Approximate walking time: .5 hour
Group Size: minimum 3, maximum 6
Equipment: one rope at least 120' long; vertical gear for each person; one 15' handline (optional).

Use the lower entrance to enter this cave. There is an awkward 8' free climb in the entrance; less experienced cavers may want to use a handline. The main chamber is reached by a 45' drop which is located well into the dark zone of the cave. This chamber is approximately 100' in diameter and contains large formations and a bell canopy.

CHRISTMAS TREE CAVE

Elevation: 4,892 feet
Distance from trailhead: 1.25 miles
Approximate walking time: 1.25 hours
Group Size: minimum 3, maximum 6
Equipment: 50' handline, sit harness, and a safety ascender

The entrance of Christmas Tree Cave consists of a 15' vertical drop around a rock partition. Although the drop to the right (when facing the cave) can be free climbed with the assistance of a 50' handline, the use of a seat harness and a safety ascender are highly recommended. The entrance chamber is covered with breakdown and gradually slopes to the first level of the cave. Here one finds numerous delicate formations. At the rear of this chamber is a large pile of breakdown blocks beyond which a lower chamber is reached. This room is silt covered and care must be taken not to track silt through the cave. This cave is well decorated and fragile. Cave swallows nest in the entrance, please do not disturb them.

DEEP CAVE

Elevation: 5,946 feet
Distance from park boundary: .25 mile
Approximate hiking time: .75 hour
Group Size: minimum 3, maximum 6
Equipment: 350' rope/150' handline to reach rig point; vertical gear for each person

This cave must be reached by traveling very rough and rocky roads through the Lincoln National Forest; a high-clearance four wheel drive vehicle is needed. The entrance passage slopes down from the 50' diameter entrance at a 45 degree angle, coming to a ledge containing a large boulder and a small stalagmite. The vertical drop requiring the use of the 350' rope is rigged from this ledge. This drop brings you to the top of a breakdown hill in a large, dome-shaped room. The passage then runs back another 500'. Except for one pool, the cave is dry, and is well decorated with totems (tall, narrow stalagmites), shields, dog-tooth spar, bell canopies and helictites.

Horizontal Caves

GOAT CAVE

Elevation: 4,614 feet
Distance from trailhead: 2.25 miles
Approximate hiking time: 1.5 hours
Group size: minimum 3, maximum 10

This is a good cave for beginning cavers. Cave swallows are sometimes found in the impressively large entrance to this cave. The cave consists mostly of one main corridor 1,130' long and from 40' to 200' wide, with a ceiling height of up to 100'. The first half of the floor is covered with burned goat manure; this ash can easily be kicked up and interfere with breathing. In the last 30 to 40 feet, the floor is covered with bat guano.

LAKE CAVE

Elevation: 5,340 feet
Distance from trailhead: 2.5 miles
Approximate walking time: 2.5 hours
Group size: minimum 3, maximum 6
Equipment: 50' handline recommended

Lake Cave is closed from May 1 to November 1 each year to protect a sensitive maternity bat colony. Groups should be experienced hikers in good condition. The hike to the cave gains 1133' in elevation and is thus very long and steep. The cave runs NE for about 600', with the first 350' at approximately the same level as the entrance. 200' from the entrance, the cave opens up into a 100' by 200' chamber, at the end of which is the Lake Room. The slope leading down to the Lake room is 35', guano-covered and slick; a handline is recommended. The lake itself is 135' long, 20' to 30' wide and up to 10' deep. Even through this cave has been extensively vandalized, it is still a very scenic cave. It contains many unusual speleothems which have been partly corroded by atmospheric condensates into strange, freeform shapes.

CORKSCREW CAVE

Elevation: 4,803 feet
Distance from trailhead: .5 mile
Approximate walking time: 1/2 hour
Group size: minimum 3, maximum 4

People planning on entering this small cave should be experienced cavers. The entrance passage must be chimneyed. People with minimum climbing experience should be belayed. Portions of the cave are very delicate. A very large shield is present in the first chamber below the entrance passage.